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BACKGROUND PAPER

ON

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN COMBAT:

AN EXAMINATION OF THREE ASPECTS

Should women serve in combat? This is a complex and emotional issue that doesn't have a "right" or "wrong" answer, only various perspectives. But the fact remains that women will play a critical role in any future war. The purpose of this paper is to give the reader an understanding of the issues involving the use of women in combat. Recent legislative decisions have opened the door on this subject, and this paper will present evidence in support of these legal decisions. This paper will focus on physical, psychological, and moral aspects, with the purpose of emphasizing the need for the best defense possible. But to accurately see where we are, we must first look to the past.

Throughout history women have played vital roles in many military campaigns. World history is liberally sprinkled with the names of these warriors--Cleopatra, Bodicea, Joan of Arc, and Catherine the Great to name only a few. These women wielded both military and political influence, and

frequently participated in brutal hand to hand combat. American history has also produced numerous examples of women placed in combat circumstances (many voluntarily) from the Revolutionary War to Operation Desert Storm.

During the Civil War at least 400 women posed as soldiers. (1:16) And during World War II at least 77 American women were prisoners of war (POW) of the Japanese. (2:41) Russian women were fighter pilots (at least one was an ace) and combat snipers, and Japanese women flew on bombers as radio operators and interpreters. (4:53) These few examples make it clear that women have played a vital role in past conflicts and will continue to do so in the future. The question now is not if women should be allowed in combat roles, but to extent.

Understanding the background of this problem first requires a look at the legal parameters. In 1948 Congress passed two laws restricting the use of women near combat. These Combat Exclusion laws (U.S. Code, Title 10) barred women from ships and planes engaged in combat missions. Though the Army was not directly covered by these laws, all services followed them. In 1988 the Department of Defense (DOD) issued a policy designed to make assignments to "semi-combat" positions consistent throughout the services. This policy defined the positions that were restricted, and also identified newly opened jobs for women. Those restricted positions included airborne gunner, pararescue, combat control team, helicopter gunships, and most reconnaissance aircraft. For the most part these are enlisted positions, where the mission entails high probability of combat. At that time, 97% of all Air Force jobs were open to women. (8:18)

In late 1991 President Bush repealed the Combat Exclusion laws as part of the fiscal military spending package. This was a direct result of the success by women during Operation Desert Storm. Over 30,000 enlisted women deployed to

the Persian Gulf region, (5,000 Air Force) making up 6.6% of all U.S. forces.

(6:10-1) The repeal of the exclusion laws now leaves it up to the DOD to determine to what extent women will be used in combat roles.

Now that the legal limitations have been clarified, an objective examination of the subject can begin.

Most discussion on this subject revolves around three primary areas: physical, psychological, and moral aspects. The most obvious, physical arguments contend that women do not have the necessary strength or stamina to in combat. This position loses credibility when viewed realistically, especially in light of technological advances. Though the vast majority of women are physically weaker than their male counterparts, there are many combat positions which don't require high physical strength. Enforcing proper standards and physical conditioning would ensure that both men and women are qualified for these combat positions. Additionally, technical advances have equalized the physical burdens placed on combatants. Lighter weapons and equipment have greatly reduced the physical stamina needed. Therefore, physical disparity between men and women is much less critical.

In another aspect, psychological make up, women have already shown they can sustain themselves under battle stress. The primary objection here continues to be that captured male prisoners could be exploited (for intelligence purposes) because of the supposed vulnerability of fellow female POWs by their captors. Certainly this possibility cannot be discounted. Some evidence shows that men have a higher concern about how they would react to improper handling of female prisoners. But most military psychologists feel that the stresses produced by combat or capture would tend to form strong bonds of mutual support, a kind of "unisex" bonding. As for sexual

manipulation of female captives, in many previous conflicts male soldiers have frequently been subjected to sexual assaults, though this fact is seldom publicized. (5:18) An expert in combat stress is Major John Jessen, Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) psychologist at the POW simulation camp at Fairchild AFB, Washington. He stated that "After seven years of observing POW training, I've seen no difference in the ability of men and women to fight and resist." (8:18) His assistant, Captain (Dr) Brian Sugden has also noted females "...handle the stress of the course well. They also perform better than the average male during interrogations." (3:14) These statements reflect observations of over 600 enlisted women who have completed the rigorous course. These facts dispel the idea of female psychological deficiency.

Contrary to the previous aspects (physical and psychological) the moral issue cannot be proven or disproven because of its intangible nature. Opponents contend that protection of women is a mark of civilization and a method of safeguarding the human race. They view women in combat as an extreme deviation from tradition. Naturally they see it detracting from the femininity of women and threatening family cohesion. Certainly these are thought provoking arguments, but they are little more than emotional appeals. They conjure up images of a pregnant woman leading a formation of troops into battle. In reality, women warriors have existed in all societies since ancient times. Hardly an indicator of declining civilization or decreased birth rates. And because it is history, there is no deviation from tradition/history. It is true that femininity will suffer in combat, but no more so than manners and common courtesies. Finally, family cohesion will not be affected anymore than when men are sent to war. An Associated Press poll revealed 56% of those surveyed approved of women in combat against Iraqi forces, despite hearing news of the deaths of five enlisted women. ("Scud" missile attack) (7:23)

Moreover, grief caused by death or capture is not more intense because of the gender of the soldier. The idea that one life is more valuable than another is an insult to both sexes.

In the final analysis, these discussions boil down to one basic idea upon which all sides agree. And that is to provide the best defense for the United States. It makes no sense to prohibit the top graduate in flight school from flying in a fighter squadron simply because she is a woman. We must have the best qualified people and use them to the best of their abilities. In these days of shrinking budgets and complex weapons systems, top quality people are needed for all positions, regardless of gender.

This issue of women in combat is not a recent phenomena. Since the beginning of recorded history women have played an important role in military affairs. Only recently has our society begun to discuss this issue. Objections based on physical, psychological, or moral reasons will continue to be raised. But, as shown previously, these objections have no real merit. The legal restriction has also been removed. The natural resistance to change will be overcome. Now the responsibility lies with the Department of Defense to open all career fields to qualified women. By this action they will send a message that the United States is intent on providing the best defense using the best people, especially in combat. After all, combat is the defining role of the military.

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